

LANGUAGE LEARNING, GENDER AND DESIRE

JAPANESE WOMEN ON THE MOVE



Kimie Takahashi



Language Learning, Gender and Desire

Japanese Women on the Move

Kimie Takahashi



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CRITICAL LANGUAGE AND LITERACY STUDIES

Series Editors: Professor Alastair Pennycook, *University of Technology, Sydney, Australia*; Professor Brian Morgan, *Glendon College/York University, Toronto, Canada*; Professor Ryuko Kubota, *University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada*

Critical Language and Literacy Studies is an international series that encourages monographs directly addressing issues of power (its flows, inequities, distributions, trajectories) in a variety of language- and literacy-related realms. The aim with this series is twofold: (1) to cultivate scholarship that openly engages with social, political and historical dimensions in language and literacy studies, and (2) to widen disciplinary horizons by encouraging new work on topics that have received little focus (see below for partial list of subject areas) and that use innovative theoretical frameworks.

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Transcription Conventions

Most of the data for this study comes from interviews and field notes which were conducted mainly in Japanese. These data were transcribed in Japanese first and translated into English by the researcher. In order to preserve the authenticity of interactional exchanges, the original Japanese data are presented first, followed by my English translation, in most of the quotes in this book. Transcription conventions used in this study are based on Piller (2002) as follows:

Japanese Transcription

。	clause final
、	short pause
～	extended ending typical of Japanese
...	long pause
！	sentence-level emphasis
？	tag question or question intonation
シドニー	original emphatic stress for particular words
@	laughter
@シドニー@	the statement between the two @ is made laughingly
[...]	analyst's omission
「幸せ」	change in voice quality when another voice is imitated or quoted
((sitting down))	non-verbal activity noticed by the researcher
[beginning of overlap
]	end of overlap

English Transcription

.	clause final
...	short pause
!	sentence-level emphasis
?	tag question or question intonation
CAPS	original emphasis stress
@	laughter
@laughter@	the statement between the two @ is made laughingly
[...]	analyst's omission
"happy"	change in voice quality when another voice is imitated or quoted
((sitting down))	non-verbal activity noticed by the researcher
[beginning of overlap
]	end of overlap

Types of Data

Type of data and date of data collection can be found in the brackets at the end of each English quote. For instance, (f17april04chizuko) indicates that the specific quote is drawn from the field note written on 17 April 2004, about Chizuko. Other types of data are represented as follows:

e	emails
i	interview
m	MSN messenger
t	telephone conversation

Series Editors' Preface

The latest book in our series takes us on a fascinating, though sometimes troubling, journey into the lives, loves and laughs of a group of Japanese women studying English in Australia. The focus here, however, is not on those standard tropes of English language learning and teaching abroad – the struggles to adapt to local linguistic and cultural norms, for example, or the motivations for such study – but rather on the interlocking domains of language, gender, race and desire – the relations between a sexualised language industry and the trajectories these women follow through the classrooms and bedrooms of English language learning. By making the question of desire central, Takahashi does far more than provide us with an enticing ethnography of language learning; this is also about language, power, race, and gender.

A number of books in this series have focused, not surprisingly, on gender. One of the basic goals of *Critical Language and Literacy Studies* has been to relate questions of language diversity to wider issues of power and inequality. We wanted to move away from the assumption in some studies of multilingualism that there is something inherently critical in the study of linguistic and cultural diversity: This common way of framing the issue aims to critique the centripetal biases of monolingual nation states, language policies and education systems, and instead to describe and promote the centrifugal forces of linguistic diversity across the world. While this matters, of course, it was our argument that support for diversity in itself does not constitute an adequate critical project. This series was not therefore conceived around normative critical approaches to linguistic diversity (focusing on the assumed benefits of multilingualism, for example, or orienting towards language maintenance), but instead aimed to open up questions of linguistic diversity in relation to broader political concerns. We wanted to focus on the complex tensions among diversity, gender, race, class, migration, sexual orientation and so on. Our goal was to bring different critical perspectives (with a focus on power and new ways of thinking about language) to studies of

multilingualism. Gender – often interwoven with other concerns – has therefore played an important role in several of the books in this series.

Gender takes on a different configuration, depending on the focus of the book. Gender is not simply a ‘social category’ into which we can map people in binary fashion (the tick-the-box approach to gender of some social sciences) but rather a constellation of attributes, prejudices, inequalities, hopes, desires, preferences, styles, duties, discourses, forms of work, forms of abuse. Gender also intersects with other social identifications including race, ethnicity, and nationality. For Kamada (2010), for example, we see the relationship between racial descriptions of being mixed, ‘double’ or ‘half’, the significance of life stage (these are adolescent girls) and gender. Kamada’s interest is in the ways in which these girls ‘discursively construct their *hybrid* identities within the context of Japan.’ (p. 4). Gender here is a constructed space that allows and disallows a range of behaviours, styles and identifications. Positioned on the one hand by discourses that construct them as not fully Japanese yet also exotically different, these adolescent girls find ways to trade on their novel status as children of mixed background, to move across identities, to take up positions within new discourses within Japan.

Ros Appleby’s (2010) book on English language teaching in international development also makes questions of gender central. As she points out, although female teachers dominate the language teaching professions, little work has explored their perceptions and experiences as gendered professionals. Bringing gender, race and language in development together, Appleby maps out the difficult and treacherous territory these women have to negotiate, enjoying the benefits of salaries, comforts and lifestyle that accrue to those on the right side of the development divide, while also being threatened, harassed and subject to all those patronizing and misogynist behaviours that can be the daily life of working women.

Gender is also central to Julia Menard-Warwick’s (2009) book on Mexican immigrants (to cities in California). As she shows, women’s and men’s experiences of English language learning may be very different because of several interconnected contexts of inequality: local articulations of patriarchy, sexual harassments, child-care concerns, and so on. In spite of these struggles against such entrenched gendered norms, Menard-Warwick argues that gender in immigrant communities nonetheless shows much greater fluidity and dynamism than is often assumed, with more options than mere adherence or resistance to static norms.

Similar questions of class, poverty, access and literacy are the central concerns of Gregorio Hernandez-Zamora’s (2010) study of impoverished Mexicans squeezed between colonial, patriarchal and religious ideologies as they struggle to transform their lives through literacy. Two of the women in

his study, 'long-term housewives and mothers with limited formal education', Alma and Sofia, struggle against 'male dominance, domestic captivity, and a paralyzing sense of powerlessness. But they both developed a strong sense of agency that fueled their decision to reach out and engage in social activities and groups that afforded powerful discourse resources, new roles of competence, and interaction with *intellectual sponsors*.' (p. 56). For these women, there had been no space for written language activities among the survival activities (raising children, working) of their daily lives. As they eventually gained access to classes and literacy, their gendered lives slowly changed.

Gender also appears as an important theme in Higgins' (2009) work on English in East Africa. In her discussion of beauty pageants, and the roles English and Swahili play in constituting the discourses around traditions, global modernity, and cultural hybridity, she highlights the tensions in changing norms around images of beauty and gender roles. Gender is also highly significant in Higgins and Norton's (2010) edited book on language and HIV/AIDS. And here gender refers not only to women (as is all too often the case in discussions of gender, men remain a discrete, unmarked, ungendered category) but also to men and sexuality. One of the crucial connections in this book is the way in which gender, sex, sexuality and HIV are locally understood through particular discourses of abstinence, patriarchy, condom use, health-related visual images and so on.

Through most, if not all, of the books in this series, we see the particularity of the struggles many women face: not just poverty but patriarchy too, not just racial definitions of hybridity, but gendered images of mixed ethnicity, not just the contradictions and difficulties of teaching English in development contexts but the added positioning of being a White woman in such contexts, not just struggles to deal with HIV/AIDS, but the many local attitudes to sexuality, disclosure and education. And as with all good critical work, we also get stories of hope, resistance and change. Rather than gendered inequalities defining lives, we also see the solidarities of women's groups, the possibilities against the odds of gaining access to literacy, the ways in which young women can turn discourses to their advantage. Gender, then, emerges as a complex range of positions, prejudices and possibilities.

Kimie Takahashi's book brings a new and important dimension to this, the issue of desire. The question of why Japanese women learn English is not here the narrow one of motivation, acculturation, or betterment that have received deserved critiques for a number of years (Norton, 2000), but rather broader questions of language ideologies (cf. Seargeant, 2009) and what English means in Japan (Kubota, 2011; Kubota & McKay, 2009). Centrally, however, we see here the relation between desire for English and sexual desire, perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the hope to get a 'native-speaker

boyfriend'. Expanding on Kelsky's (2001) historical and discursive analysis of Japanese women's desire for White Western men, Takahashi sheds new light on how language learning is specifically linked to Japanese women's romantic feelings toward White English-speaking men in Australia. Takahashi traces this *akogare* (desire or longing) for Western people, cultures and artefacts from childhoods watching *Sesame Street*, adolescent years idolizing Western music and Hollywood movie stars, the engagement with English at school, encounters with Western men in Japan or Australia, media images of languages schools and study abroad programs, and on into the current lives of these women in Sydney.

Drawing on Piller's (2002) argument that relations between language learning and gender cannot be reduced to questions of social and economic power, but need instead to include issues of desire, Takahashi here develops an understanding of the complex bundles of desire that may lie behind language learning: desire for transformation, mastery, migration, romance, and profound involvement with the Other. She shows how language desire among these young Japanese women is formed at an intersection between discourses of English language learning, Western masculinity and identity transformation. Takahashi thus carefully demonstrates that this desire is not an individual, cognitive orientation but rather a socially produced passion. At the same time, while these women may appear from some perspectives as very discursively constrained, Takahashi also locates this desire within larger life trajectories in which these women play a very active role.

This book has a number of important implications. Not only does it add another part to the picture already sketched above of the many ways in which language, gender, and race are interrelated, but it also has implications for how we understand second language acquisition, motivations and life trajectories. These are Japanese women *on the move*, a focus that also aligns this book with other recent attempts to understand the importance of relating language and mobility (Blommaert, 2010; Pennycook, 2012). Mobility, argues Blommaert (2010, p. 21), 'is the great challenge: it is the dislocation of language and language events from the fixed position in time and space attributed to them by a more traditional linguistics and sociolinguistics.' While Blommaert's focus is on the need for a sociolinguistics that is attentive to the mobility of linguistic resources, to linguistic repertoires as they occur in time and space, Takahashi brings another dimension to this as we follow these women's life trajectories in and around English.

The book pioneers the emerging inquiry that not only illuminates romantic desires attached to language learning but also problematizes power, politics, and ideologies hidden behind *akogare*. The uniqueness of the author's focus and positionality shapes a significant part of the rising scholarship on

the intersectionality among gender, race, language, and power, as found in such topics as masculinity and heterosexuality as unmarked norms in English language teaching (Appleby, in press; Bailey, 2007), economic exploitation of such desires by the language teaching industry (Bailey, 2006; Kubota, 2011), and the feminization of non-Western women vis-à-vis Western women in cyberspace dating (Kubota, 2008). The unveiled *akogare* of the women on the move as introduced in this book poses intriguing questions for researchers and practitioners not only in Japan and Australia but also in other global locations.

Alastair Pennycook
Ryuko Kubota
Brian Morgan

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